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ABSTRACT

A glance at new textbooks or at ads in composition journals will show that besides "writing" and "reading," the word "process" appears more often than any other word. Composition has followed other theoretical notions in the air and turned from analyzing finished essays to examining the processes which produced them. Procedures for writing in identifiable stages have always been taught, but a better cognitive model does not automatically result in better teaching. Five areas of concern for process theory applications are the following: (1) teaching writing does not mean teaching writing theory; (2) danger lies in replacing the old prescriptivism with a new one; (3) process is responsible for a stage organization of recent texts, with some texts now devoting 400 pages to successive stages; (4) process approach can make the treatment of individual assignments less natural by isolating and examining every stage and artificially extending the process; and (5) even though the most valuable insight about composition is that students learn to write by writing, students in many process-oriented classrooms write fewer compositions. Two more potential dangers facing the process revolution are that the emphasis upon a process/product dichotomy leads to seeing colleagues in stereotypical terms, and that process revolutionaries can become the new establishment, with theory and research valued more highly than teaching. A reexamination of basic tenets and the deductions that follow them, as well as a moratorium on the process would be in order. (References are attached.) (NKA)

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Requiem for a Shibboleth

Or, Has *Process* Outlived Its Usefulness?

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At recent composition conferences, I have been struck by how many speakers used the phrase *the writing process* and its corollary *the process approach* as touchstones in their argumentation. The phrases seemed to come to speakers' lips easily and confidently, quite evidently as axioms that were indisputable, requiring no examination or defense--indeed no explanation. Even more striking, while these speakers were assuming *process* as a single catholic faith, they were using it to sanction a quite diverse range of beliefs and practices. While being the shibboleth that signifies the elect, *process* can be cited by all ranks of devils and angels for almost any purpose.[1]

If further evidence is needed about how obligatory and widely diffused *the writing process* has become, one need only scan the new textbooks that arrive in the mail. Just as the packaged food industry appends the label "natural" to the most chemical-laden junk foods, the textbook industry, wise in the ways of the world, has discovered that "process" is good for sales. (The speculation is irresistible: if Holt or

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[1]My experience was not unique; Susan McLeod made a similar observation in "The New Orthodoxy: Rethinking the Process Approach."

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Harbrace bought out Kraft, would they advertise Velveeta as "the cheese made with the process approach"?)

A glance at the ads in a recent composition journal shows that next to "writing" and "reading," the word "process" appears more often in textbook advertising copy than any other.[2] Ads for one "*process*-oriented freshman rhetoric" tell us it "emphasizes argumentation at each stage of the writing *process* . . . [, s]eparates the *processes* of revision, editing, and proofreading . . . [, s]tresses that research is a *process* of inquiry . . . [,] and [d]ramatizes the thought *processes* of a typical student. . . " (emphasis added).

Book titles similarly reflect the power of the word. There are rhetorics: *Process and Structure in Composition* and *Writing Essays: A Process Approach*; there's the new growth industry, the reading process: *The Writer's Craft: a Process Reader* and *The Essay: Readings for the Writing Process*. If writing and reading can be processes, so too can research: there's *The Bedford Guide to the Research Process*. There is *A Process Approach to ESL Composition* and, to show how things have come full circle, we have *Thinking on Paper: A Writing Process Workbook* and *The Concise Process Workbook*.

The ads reveal that no area of composition has remained untouched: one book offers "complete coverage of the technical writing process." Another is the "most comprehensive, process-oriented handbook on the market today." A reader "engages students in the writing process as well as the interpretive process." We're told that a developmental text "presents grammatical material within the context of the writing process." The second

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[2]Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from advertisements in the February 1987 issue of *College Composition and Communication*.

edition of a fiction-writing text "contains a new chapter on the writing process." A poetry-writing book now "tighten[s its] discussions of . . . process." Even a book that calls itself a "step-by-step inductive approach to teaching basic grammar" now in its third edition "features expanded coverage of . . . the writing process."

As indication of just how important that seven-letter word has become in the industry, even the long established texts, those bastions of tradition, feel it advantageous to wrap themselves in the process mantle. *The Little, Brown Handbook* in its third edition offers "fuller treatment of the writing process." In its fifth edition Tibbetts and Tibbetts "retains its rhetorical approach, with increased emphasis on the writing process." The fabulously successful Lester, in its fifth edition, "brings the idea of writing as a process to research paper writing" (vi). McCrimmon in its eighth edition offers an "expanded treatment of the writing process" (xiii), and *Harbrace*, the all-time publishing gold mine and an abiding emblem for what the process revolutionaries were rebelling against, says that its tenth edition "fully describes the recursive process of planning, writing, and revising" (Whitten v). Would it appear that there are now no new worlds to conquer?

Or has change been less sweeping than it appears? Is the situation like that in a *New Yorker* cartoon a few years ago that depicted a New England farm couple at a roadside stand? The canny farmer was telling his wife, "Remember, it's organic for them as wants organic." I can imagine a similar scene at publishers' sales meetings: "Remember, it's process for them as wants process."

Of course some of the textbooks have discovered process the way a politician discovers religion before an election. Some simply append

sections on pre-writing or revision without fundamental change. But certainly most new text authors are true believers, and their devotion to process is neither superficial nor hypocritical. Marketing cynicism is inevitable, and my concern is not with the sinners but the elect. I am concerned that what is sometimes taught most sincerely in the name of process is neither more effective nor even less damaging to young writers than that taught by other models.

I'm not objecting to process per se; I'm a believer myself. It is not the faith but works that concern me. By their fruits ye shall know them. And when the congregation of the faithful includes both its Mother Theresas and its Jim Bakkers, a searching examination of conscience is called for.

The notion of the writing process is simple enough: Writing is an activity that takes place over time. Moreover, it is an activity with identifiably discrete stages, which have been variously classified but are generally divided into the three major phases of planning, drafting, and revision.[3]

The idea is simple, even obvious. Perhaps a reason why *this* observation about writing became *the central* observation (in contrast with many other equally obvious and valid observations that could be made about writing) was that it resembled other theoretical notions in the air. In linguistics, for example, Chomsky's transformational model described the generating of the sentence as a process occurring over time, an event with

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[3]Lester Faigley reports on "competing theories of process" that "vary from theorist to theorist" (527). The three theories he identifies start from the same basic notion I mention but move in strikingly different directions. His article reinforces the notion that "process" can be all things to all people.

discrete stages or components. Linguists no longer simply parsed already formed sentences but now studied how they came into being.

Composition too turned away from a parsing model--turned from analyzing finished essays to examining the processes by which they came about. Simply describing what good writing is, it was recognized, does not help students if that information is irrelevant to producing the product. The idea that instruction must be based on the practices of real writers, not on established teaching traditions or even on intuitions, made modern composition, like modern linguistics, less prescriptive, more descriptive.

Linguistics has remained analytical, but the emphasis has shifted from surface analysis to analyzing the process by which these surface structures evolve from deep structures. Composition has followed a similar course. Our research has been aimed at understanding our composing processes by examining the various stages and their interrelationship. By so doing we have gained valuable insights. We have learned, for example, that for experienced writers, prewriting and revision take up a preponderance of their time and that composing is a recursive rather than a strictly linear process, to mention just two better known insights.

Of course to say that process overthrew product in a revolutionary upheaval is a simplification. Procedures for writing with identifiable stages have always been taught. To teach the five-paragraph theme is to present a process. ("First, one makes a claim about something. Then one thinks of exactly three arguments in support of that claim. Then . . . .") It's not that this isn't a process, but it's the *wrong* process. The five-paragraph theme, the detailed outline completed before composing begins, the topic-sentence model of paragraph construction: all of these

represent composing-process models which have been rejected because they falsely represent the actual processes of most writers.

Unfortunately, having a better cognitive model does not automatically result in better teaching. I would like to identify five areas where applications of process theory have had the potential for leading us astray in the classroom.

First, we need to remind ourselves that teaching writing does not mean teaching the *theory* of writing. Not everything that is true is useful. Teaching *about* processes is not the same thing as teaching the processes themselves. While writers do make many conscious decisions in composing and while most writing acts are more self-conscious than most speech acts, it is still true that most by far of the mental activity involved in writing takes place on the tacit or unconscious level. Teachers and textbook authors must remain aware of the difference between conscious, theoretical knowledge and the largely unconscious performance knowledge. We should teach only those theoretical areas that have been shown to transfer. Just as in linguistics, where we learned many years ago that teaching grammar, which is a theory about language, does not substantially improve the applied language skills of students, so we must remember in composition that there is only a limited usefulness in teaching *about* composing practices. Theory is no substitute for practice.

One indirect but real benefit, to be sure, of providing a theoretical overview of composing is a psychological and motivational one. By showing students the arduousness of composing, we give them the comfort of knowing that their struggles are both typical and expected, which helps them gain the fortitude to press on. (It is much like assuring teenage boys, "No, you are not oversexed; everybody your age feels like that.")

A second and related caution: we must beware of replacing the old prescriptivism with a new one. We do not want students to think that process means they are supposed to follow a pattern. Yet by providing textbooks with schematic diagrams, checklists, and detailed enumerations of the stages and substages of composing, we may give students precisely the wrong attitude about writing. Far from liberating them, we can unwittingly lead insecure and inexperienced students into believing that writing is indeed the arcane and structured exercise they always feared it was. Far from freeing them to see new options and to invent new strategies and styles, we can easily narrow their vision to the procedures (every bit as much as did the five-paragraph-theme approach). Our well meant advice for expanding their horizons can become their rules and limits.

As one of many examples where description can appear to students as rules and prescriptions, take Linda Flower's book, *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*, which provides on its back cover a list of "Steps and Strategies for the Composing Process." There are nine steps, each representing a different stage in the writing process. For each step a number of strategies are listed (for a total of 25 strategies). Moreover, there are substrategies within the text itself. For example, in step 8, "Test and Edit Your Writing," under Strategy 2, "Edit for a Forceful Style," there are five "approaches," such as #1, "Lower the noun/verb ratio," and #5, "Transform passive constructions into active ones." While her techniques are meant as options and strategies that students might try, some students, no matter how much we urge the creativity of composing, will take these (and similar lists in many other textbooks) as step-by-step instructions in assembling an essay. For one thing, doing so is *their* simplest strategy for dealing with the complexity of the process our instruction is showing them.

As another example, take the approach of textbooks to prewriting. Writers do at times use diverse techniques for inventing and organizing, and it can be useful for students to try them out. But should a text devote fifty pages to teaching ten different "creating techniques" (as does Elizabeth Cowan Neeld's book, *Writing*)? Because invention strategies are now ubiquitous in rhetorics (and plagiarized from text to text), the danger exists that both students and teachers will think of these not as resources but as requirements for writing. Many students now believe they are supposed to list and loop and map and cluster and ask who, what, and where. If they don't, they believe, they are not writing correctly, and since of course they usually don't (why would they?), they have their belief reinforced that writing as taught in school is an artificial, academic game.

Caution three: in addition to the dangers of prescriptivism in the approach, look what process has done to the organization of textbooks and of courses based on them. Having rejected both the building-block organization of progressively larger units (first grammar and words, then sentences, paragraphs, and finally essays) and the mode organization (narration, description, comparison-contrast, and so on), recent texts have largely replaced them with a stage organization, with succeeding chapters of the books corresponding, in chronological order, to different stages in the writing process. The problem is that, with texts now devoting 400 pages to the successive stages, it can take an entire semester before a class examines one complete act of writing. What and how do they write in the meantime? Are we preparing students to write an essay only when the course is finished?

Fourth, even if we *are* able to treat all the stages collectively from the first, a process approach can still make our treatment of individual

assignments less, rather than more, natural. For each essay assignment, by isolating, examining, and practicing every stage, we artificially extend the process as a whole. A 500-word essay can easily take up three or even more weeks, with time devoted to invention, preliminary drafts, editing sessions, conferences, revision, proofreading, and evaluation. The process may reflect the stages that you and I experience when we write, but in same the way that a funhouse mirror reflects our bodies. The parts are all there, but greatly distorted in size and proportion and in the way they are put together. In composition as in nuclear physics, a Heisenberg principle operates: The more we slow down the process to examine its parts, the less our likelihood of seeing them as they are.

My fifth caution represents an even greater irony. Our most valuable insight about composition has been that students learn to write by writing. As practiced in many classrooms, however, teaching process means assigning fewer papers than before. Many teachers report that whereas ten years ago they were assigning a paper a week, now each paper occupies two or three weeks. Students may create multiple drafts, and their finished products may be improved, but they produce far fewer of them. Are we certain they are better off as a result?

Recently William F. Buckley wrote that it was not uncommon for him to write a column from start to finish in twenty minutes (3). He held to his claim despite much skepticism and attributed his fluency to the writing course he took at Yale titled Daily Themes. In this remarkable course students were required to hand in six 500-word essays a week--not free writings or journal entries but polished finished products. Certainly most of us teach different students from those at Yale, but it is still worth considering whether such extensive experience, even for average students

and even if unaccompanied by theory or heuristics, might not teach them more about their writing processes, both unconsciously and consciously, than even the best informed intensive experience we can give with just a few assignments. I doubt we should replace one extreme with another (particularly given the daunting paper load of the daily theme), but students in our courses need the opportunity to produce a reasonably extensive range and quantity of finished products. We need to find at least a middle ground between the conflicting goals of intensive and extensive experience.

In addition to those five cautions, let me add two more potential dangers facing the process revolution, these more political than pedagogical in nature. "Process," like any label, has the power both to identify a group and to isolate it. In my own 30-member English department, where everyone teaches freshman composition, the phrase "process approach" now provokes an automatic negative reaction from "traditional literature specialists" (to use another such reifying label). The words themselves provoke hostility to ideas that might otherwise be favorably received. If we insist upon emphasizing a process/product dichotomy, it will mean we and our colleagues will see each other in stereotyped terms, with diminished chances for us to influence and learn from each other.

The second danger for the process revolution is that it can easily follow the course of all other revolutions. Consider our profession's history from a revolutionary slant: Before the revolution comp teachers were overworked, underpaid, underappreciated, the lowliest serfs in the academic fiefdom. Along came the heady new doctrine of process. It seemed fresh, it seemed true, it promised to liberate us from the chains of an

outworn and oppressive tradition. It swept through the profession, winning adherents in ever growing numbers until the revolution was irresistible. New ideas took hold, composition gained and continues to gain in prestige and power.

But as with every revolution, what happens when the last battle is won? The revolutionaries perforce become the new establishment. In fact, the more composition becomes established as a prestige discipline, the more closely it comes to resemble other disciplines in academia. Theory and research become more highly valued than teaching. Today, ironically, the more established one becomes in composition, the fewer courses one is likely to teach, and, of these, the more likely they are to be graduate courses in theory than applied courses in freshman composition. The old values live on after all, and the new rulers, like the old, grow increasingly remote from the masses.

Fortunately, in spite of troubling signs, the death knell is not yet sounding for the process approach. The profession is to all appearances more robust than ever. And despite my focus here on concerns, I think our teaching is now better informed and more effective than ever. But even our robustness can represent a danger. Too easy victories and the absence of a credible opposition can lead us to complacency. More than ever we need to renew our examination of both our basic tenets and the deductions that follow from them.

The writing process lives on, but perhaps it is time for a moratorium on use of the phrase itself. Without the shibboleth, we might be liberated to discover new ideas. As a result, we might even delay for a while the need for the next revolution.

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